

"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

# The Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin

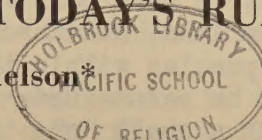
Published by The Christian Rural Fellowship, 156 Fifth Avenue, New York 10, N. Y.

No. 199

1955

## SPIRITUAL RESOURCES FOR TODAY'S RURAL LIFE

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The purpose of this paper is to re-view and re-think portions of a topic which has had much literary and sociological treatment: Life on the farm and in the small town, viewed from the standpoint of factors in the rural environment which serve as resources for spiritual values. There has been much "pseudo-Wordsworthian gush" on this subject; there has been much serious and balanced treatment which has lifted out the dignity, worth and values of rural living, coupled with a dispassionate analysis and evaluation of the grim, sordid, soul-killing materialistic routine of the rural daily round.

Mark Twain is reported to have said, "No one speaks so fluently and convincingly on a subject, as one what ain't hampered by the facts." At the price of being neither fluent nor convincing, I am limiting my treatment of this subject to a standard which has inherent limitations. I am touching only such points as those on which, on the basis of personal experience, I have had opportunity to come to some conclusions and convictions. I cover this topic under the categories of:

- I The Natural Environment - its "Four Kingdoms"
- II The Social and Socializing Factors in Rural Living
- III The Sacramental Concept of Life - and Emergence of the "Fifth Kingdom"
- IV The Spiritual Resource which is The Christian Church - and the Nurture of Spiritual Values

### I THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

The most vivid, dramatic and greatest single factor which distinguishes rural life from city life is contact with the natural environment. It is trite

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and a truism to re-state that people living under rural conditions live more closely to the natural environment than does the Man of the City. The aspects of this environment which have inherent potential spiritual resources for the rural person are to be found in the four natural "Kingdoms" of the universe.

## 1. THE LAND - The Mineral Kingdom

The first of these is the mineral kingdom as revealed in THE LAND. The rural person cannot but become aware that THE LAND, though composed of inorganic and organic matter is really more than a mass of chemical compounds. The rural person comes to be aware that he cannot escape his dependence on The Land. He finds he must deal with the land in accord with its own inherent capacities. In the land, and through it, courses the very substance of life, not unlike the corpuscles within the blood stream coursing in the human body. The "balance" must be maintained, or "illness" results. It is not simply "soil" spelled with a small "s"; it is The Land, spelled with a capital "L". It is a basic element in God's Creation; in its fertility or life-giving substance is a part of God's continuation of Creation. "And God called the dry land Earth; ..... And God saw that it was good". (Gen. 1:10)

Martin Thornton in "Rural Synthesis", endeavoring to define the religious basis of rural culture, states concerning Land, "Like human personality it (Land) is made up of a complexity of qualities and characteristics which together form an indivisible and complete unity. For as with personality we may speak of body, mind, instinct, and spirit, so with The Land we can regard its physical, spiritual, emotional, and aesthetic properties; but no one property can be completely or permanently isolated from the others. In both cases, there is an interdependence which defies analysis -- neither the fullest biological account of the human body nor the wisest psychological discourse upon the workings of the human mind can give us a satisfactory idea of a man. The same applies to "The Land".

The Old Testament is replete with this emphasis that Land is the base of life, entrusted to Man by God. Says Moses to the people of Israel as they were about to enter the Promised Land, "that ye may live, and multiply and go in and possess The Land--and thou shalt remember the Lord thy God; For the Lord thy God bringeth thee into a Good Land; Beware that thou forget not the Lord thy God, lest when thou hast eaten and art full--- --- and when all that thou hast is multiplied; Then thine heart be lifted up and thou forget the Lord thy God; And thou say in thine heart, My power, and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth;---I testify against you this day that he shall surely perish". (Deut. 8:1;17).

It is in this concept that The Land is more than material substance; that man's life and all he holds of value are dependent on it--that we find one of the great natural potential spiritual values and resources in rural living. When this concept of The Land becomes either dimly emotionally experienced or rationally and theologically articulated, the rural person finds in his natural environment a spiritual resource which lifts him to an understanding of both the "wholeness" and "holiness" of the good earth.

## 2. THE SEED, GERMINATION and FERTILITY - The Vegetable Kingdom

The seed, its germination, fertility and growth are among the factors



in the natural environment which bring their message of spiritual values to the rural person. That spark of life, emerging from the dry seed when it is placed in an environment conducive to germination and growth brings the rural person face to face with the mystery of the Life Force which—just as Land must be spelled with a capital "L"—so calls for a capital "L" in Life. This process of the germination of the single seed into fruitfulness of a hundred or thousand-fold brings together as one, Land and Life as inescapable and inexplicable facts in the continuing process of Creation. "And God said, Let the Earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit trees yielding fruit, after his kind, whose seed is in itself, upon the earth: and it was so". (Gen. 1:11)

### 3. BIRDS, ANIMALS and REPRODUCTION - The Animal Kingdom

In most situations the life of the rural person is surrounded with a variety of the animal kingdom. From their individual and group behavior he witnesses the amazing capacity of animal life to adapt itself, sustain itself and reproduce itself. The mystery of the egg and the sperm—of male and female—of the purposeful evolutionary development from simple animal protoplasm to protozoa, colenterates, the invertebrates, the vertebrates to the mammals: In it all is God the Creator and Sustainer of Life. "And God said, Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life, and fowl that may fly above the earth in the open firmament of heaven. ... And God blessed them saying, Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let fowl multiply in the earth. ... And God said, Let the earth bring forth the living creature after his kind, cattle, and creeping thing, and beast of the earth after his kind: and it was so. ... And God made the beast of the earth after his kind, and cattle after their kind, and every thing that creepeth upon the earth after his kind: and God saw that it was good." (Gen. 1: 20;22; 24; 25)

Equally impressive of the immanence and transcendence of God in the natural world is the design and character of a feather as an instrument of flight, a bee colony as social organization, a beaver dam as incarnate intelligence.

### 4. MAN - The Human Kingdom

Just as in his rural setting man is surrounded with the raw elements of which his life are based, created and sustained, so in this environment of creation, fertility and growth, man becomes naturally aware of his own unique relationship to the whole of the natural world. In his association with living creatures of all kinds, he observes not only his dependence on the mineral and vegetable kingdoms, but his similarity to and difference from the animal Kingdom. In the rural setting, the Genesis story of Creation becomes true, both as poetry and process. "And the Lord God made man from the dust of the earth, breathing into him the breath of life: and man became





a living soul; and God made man in his own image, in the image of God he made him; and the Lord God made a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had made. ... And the Lord God took one of the bones from his side while he was sleeping and the bone he made into a woman, and took her to the man. And the man said, there is now bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh: Let her name be Woman because she was taken out of Man. And God gave them his blessing".

"And God gave them his blessing and said to them, Be fertile and have increase, and make the earth full and be masters of it; be rulers over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing moving on the earth.

And God said, See, I have given you every plant producing seed, on the face of all the earth, and every tree which has fruit producing seed; they will be for your food:

And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the air and every living thing moving on the face of the earth I have given every green plant for food: and it was so.

And God saw everything which he had made and it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

And the heaven and the earth and all things in them were complete.

And on the seventh day God came to the end of all his work; and on the seventh day he took his rest from all the work which he had done.

And God gave his blessing to the seventh day and made it holy: because on that day he took his rest from all the work which he had made and done. (Composite of Genesis: 1 and 2. Accounts of Creation of Man)

In this rural setting, other factors are present which remind man that although he is a part of the created world with "dominion over every creature", yet the natural world moves in response to forces outside the power of man to control. One of the most inescapable of these is the seasonal cycle.

The rhythm of the Universe, reflected in the changing seasons of Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter makes its impact on man in a rural and natural environment. The activities of the daily routine, the type of manual labor—ploughing, sowing, harvesting—all call for a change in tempo of life induced by the fact that he is in a natural environment. Rural man adjusts his daily work to the life forces of the Universe itself. Again, he experiences his dependence is on the Creator and Sustainer of life.

Then, in his natural environment, regardless of how insensitive or undeveloped in his feeling for the esthetic, man cannot fully escape the natural grandeur of the earth and the Universe—"The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth his handiwork". Mountains and valleys, deserts and rivers, forests and fields, sunrise and sunset—all combine in their own way in their own geographical area to bring out the holiness of beauty and the beauty of holiness. All combine for a manifestation of the pervading note



"this is greater than man--this is of God!"

In this emphasis on the positive influences of the natural environment in contributing spiritual values for rural living, we are ready to acknowledge that there is much that is ruthless, cruel, grim, and negative in the natural environment. Nor is this emphasis denying that God's presence can be felt anywhere, everywhere, anytime--be it roaring factory, dusty mine or humid city subway. But, as Rudolph Otto so fully propounds in his classic "Sense of The Holy (or Numinous)", there are circumstances, situations and environments in which man more readily apprehends God's presence. We hold that the rural setting is conducive to providing this most elemental of all spiritual resources for rural people.

Additional spiritual resources for rural life are to be found in the normal social structures in which the rural person is involved. Foremost among these is the family unit.

## II THE RURAL FAMILY UNIT

It should be frankly faced that there has been uttered many stupid shibboleths regarding the domestic felicity of the rural family. Both for parents and children, family life on the farm or in the small town can be marred by discord, tension, cruelty, monotony, and be the cause of blighted and warped personality development. The truth of this is known by every rural pastor. It is dramatically and sadly portrayed in many of the best novels based on the American scene. Yet, granting that the rural locale does not automatically carry with it the ideal of family life and parent-child relationship, it yet holds true that the natural virtues which evidence sound personality are most readily to be developed in the rural family. In the rural community, the family still remains the unit, as against the individualism characteristic of urban life.

The disintegrative factors of our highly urbanized, mechanized, individualized society impinge increasingly on the rural family. Yet, the rural family still retains a stability and unity which persists. The type of individual who is nurtured in this family atmosphere is essential to the ultimate best character of the nation and the world. Thus it can be stated, without fear of negation based on the numerous sad exceptions, that the rural family itself is one of the great spiritual resources, both for those who share in its bonds, and in its overflow into the life of the nation.

The extension of those same values to be found for the individual in the rural family relationship is to be found for the family itself in the environment of the rural neighborhood and community.

## III THE RURAL COMMUNITY

Much is said and written about the "breakdown" of rural neighborhoods and rural communities. Modern communication and transportation have sharply made their impact on rural society. In many places the close-knit, compact sense of community has been either greatly weakened, or even obliterated. Yet, coupled with these undermining, inevitable economic and social forces has come a widespread, reawakened awareness of the importance of neighborhood groupings and small community life. Probably no subject has become a broader concern among economists, educators, the Church, and social scientists generally, than this sound structure known as the small community. Reason for this is that it



has been demonstrated to a point of accepted fact that human and social values are gained or lost for the individual, the family and the nation, to the degree that there is an awareness on the part of the individual of his role in group relationships, the composite of which produce a sense of community. This sense of belonging to the whole of society finds its nexus in participating in the on-going relationships of the local community. Thus the community itself becomes a resource of social and spiritual values to the individual, the family, and the nation.

But it is basically the Christian Church which must bring the quickening of the human spirit to the point of experiencing the true spiritual resources to be found in any of these matters.

#### IV THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN RURAL LIFE

It is the Christian Church with a sacramental concept of all life which is the basic spiritual resource for rural people. It is in the doctrine of the Incarnation, God made flesh in Christ Jesus, that a full unity is expressed between the physical and the spiritual. To apprehend this unity of the physical and the spiritual is an essential for rural people in order that the natural "Kingdoms" of Creation be perceived as incarnating the spiritual. The tragedy in rural life is that much of what claims to be the Christian religion makes a completely false distinction between the material and the spiritual. "Salvation" is expressed in terms which mean escape from the material. This is a heresy (Nestorianism) condemned in an early era of the Christian Church. All of creation is to be viewed as a vehicle for God's creative, redeeming, sustaining power. As the natural world is thus viewed, sacramentally, the traditional Trinitarian theology becomes not an ecclesiastical verbal formula, but the expression of the most normal, simple, and greatest truths. The spiritual resource available to rural people to lay hold on through the Church is to be able to understand with the heart as well as the mind that the Catechetical statement of the meaning of the Apostles' Creed is not only the basic statement of Christian faith, but of the natural and spiritual universe:

"What do you chiefly learn in these Articles of Your Belief?

Ans. - First, I learn to believe in God the Father, who hath made me, and all the world.

Secondly, in God the Son, who hath redeemed me, and all mankind.

Thirdly, in God the Holy Ghost, who sanctifieth me and all the people of God.

And this Holy Trinity, One God, I praise and magnify, saying: Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost; As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Coupled with this belief in One God, manifesting His power in three expressions, of Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier, is the doctrine of the Christian Church as the fellowship of all believers, and the vessel of God's continuing Grace expressed through the Sacraments.



The service of the Church, then, in her ministry to rural people is to be that great spiritual resource which ennobles them, to lay hold on the true meaning and experience of the spiritual values within the daily stuff of life with which they are surrounded--their natural world and the world of their fellowmen.

It is this resource--which is the Church--which communicates both the knowledge and the power which enables man to move from simply the human nature "Fourth Kingdom" to the "Fifth Kingdom" of the redeemed Christian.

